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“ALWAYS BAYRAM, ALWAYS EASTER”: THE CALL FOR ALBANIAN CIVIC UNITY IN GJERGJ FISHTA’S *THE HIGHLAND LUTE*

Abstract

Gjergj Fishta's verse narrative, *Lahuta e Malcis* (ca. 1907) is often regarded as the national epic of Albanians. The epic produces a fresh vision of the shared cultural identity of Albanians by telling the story of their struggle for independence blended with elements of regional and local culture which had never before entered into high literary language. The paper argues that Fishta creates a national epic not just by the events he narrates in the poem but also by the language and imagery he uses. The poem's language puts Albanian modes of expression into high literature, depicts Muslim and Christian Albanian practices in a manner that emphasizes their common ground, and utilizes Albanian folklore such as the mythological creatures called *zana* and *ora*, which lie outside both the Christian and Muslim religions, but are closely associated with the land. In emphasizing the Albanian land, language, and culture, Fishta's epic poem crafts a civic Albanian identity that embraces Albanian religious diversity and transcends sectarian identifications. In light of

budding extremist movements in Kosovo and Albania, it is important to continue to produce relevant analysis of Fishta's vision for Albanian civic unity, transcending divisions of religious affiliation.

Keywords: Gjergj Fishta, *The Highland Lute*, Marash Uci, Bayram, Easter, *ora, zana*

Introduction

Gjergj Fishta (1871–1940) is often called the Albanian Homer. His epic, *The Highland Lute* (*Lahuta e Malcis*), weaves a narrative of events from regional and international history together with folk culture, telling the story of Albania and creating a sense of cultural identity shared among Albanians. In his lyric poetry, Fishta criticizes the failures of Albanians in their struggles toward national self-determination, but in the epic, Fishta articulates a heroic vision of the Albanian national struggle. This verse masterwork by the Franciscan priest from Shkodra had tremendous success in knitting together an inclusive narrative about warriors of Muslim and Christian backgrounds, depicting their stories as part of a common cause – the liberation of Albania.

The first part of *The Highland Lute* was published in Croatia in 1905, and the second part in 1907. The final, expanded edition appeared in 1937, totaling thirty cantos and 15,613 rhyming lines, spanning the years 1862 to 1913. The cohesive narrative encompasses milestone political events that affected Albanians, from the Turko-Russian War (1877) to the London Conference of 1912–13, inserting Albanian responses to these events into a global literary conversation. Many historical figures are characters – along with supernatural creatures from Albanian folklore. The text is a compendium of Albanian myths, expressions, and practices. This blend of historical and folkloric elements, often incorporating language drawn from local usage, cross-cuts religious divisions among Albanians. It creates a voice that is not secular in the sense of absence of religion – there is God in it – yet, it appeals across religious affiliations to a secular identity. By narrating major events of regional history seamlessly with Albanian folklore, and by collecting into one narrative the locally heralded stories of Muslim and Christian Albanians, Fishta articulates a civic culture shared

among Albanians of all religions. Today, with emerging Islamist extremist elements attempting to divide Albanian identity along religious lines, Fishta's vision is especially valuable to Albanians and to the world.

1. Wings on a Flag

After the Russo-Turkish war (1877–1878), the Ottoman Empire was considerably weakened; some Balkan nations won independence, while Albanian territories, still under Ottoman rule, became subject to attack by neighbors, such as Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece. Being threatened by the Treaty of San Stefano (March 1878), in which newly established Balkan states grabbed traditionally Albanian territories, Albanians organized to raise demands for independence prior to the Congress of Berlin (June/July 1878):

Three days before the Congress of Berlin opened, a colourful group of men was gathering in Prizren, a town of quiet majesty in the Kosovo vilayet[major administrative district in the Ottoman Empire]. . . . Nobles from all over the [Balkan] peninsula would buy their brilliantly inlaid guns and sabres in Prizren. But the landowners, priests and chieftains who arrived on that hot June day in 1878 had not come in search of gifts. They had come to organize. Most of the delegates to the League of Prizren were Muslims but there were a few Catholics and one or two members of the Orthodox Church. They were united only by the disaster threatened by the slow collapse of the Ottoman Empire and by their language – Albanian. (Glenny 151)

The Highland Lute characterizes the political situation after the decline of the Ottoman Empire as a result of the Russo-Turkish War in 1877: “Therefore, when Turkish *ora*'s / Vigour waned, began to weaken / When her drive began to crumble, / Russia day by day beset her / And the tribesmen of Balkans / Newly fled the sultan's power” (*Lute* 4). By personifying Ottoman power as an *ora*, a powerfully protective female spirit in Albanian folklore, Fishta's text puts local Albanian perception of the long-dominant empire at the center.

Fishta goes on to describe Albanian political restiveness: “Did the Albanians start to ponder / How to free their native country / From the Turkish yoke and make it, / As when ruled by Castriot” (*Lute 4*). Kastrioti is Skanderbeg, the fifteenth-century military figure who led the Albanian resistance against Ottoman conquest for twenty-five years. Fishta invokes Skanderbeg (1405–1468) as a symbol of national aspirations, not a Christian symbol against Islam, constructing a secular continuity for Albanian aspirations across five hundred years of Ottoman domination. Thereby, Fishta is articulating a symbolic continuity that may have existed in local discourses but is being written in a literary voice here. Albanians are thinking, he continues, about the times “When Albanians lived in freedom / Did not bow or show submission, / To a foreign king or sultan, / Did not pay them tithes and taxes, / And Albania’s banner fluttered / Like the wings of all God’s angels, / Like the bolts of lightning flashing, / Waving high atop their homeland” (*Lute 4*). His lines link resistance to the Ottomans with resistance to Serbian domination – to any foreign domination. All this “Albanian thinking” occurs in the line “Like the wings of all God’s angels” (*Lute 4*) that depicts angels not a divisive religious symbol, but as an image common to both Islam and Christianity. In addition, Fishta transfers the meaning of this religious sign to a civic national referent, the flag of Albania. The wings and the *flash of lightning* subtly refer to the specific features of the Albanian flag, i.e. the two-headed eagle with spread wings on a red background, used by Skanderbeg and banned by the Ottomans for centuries.

2. Oso and the Powderkeg, and an Old Man of the Sea

In narrating in Canto 5 the martial heroism of Oso Kuka, Fishta highlights the Albanian custom of not being captured alive in battle. Kuka, a historical figure, is an Albanian highlander in the Ottoman army who is recruited by the local Turkish leader to gather a local force to fend off Montenegrin attacks on Shkodra, a city that historically was a center of Albanian culture. The battle occurs at Lake Shkodra, which lies on the border of Albania and Montenegro. Despite the fact that the call for defense is issued by the Turkish overlords, this battle is depicted as coalescing into a national feeling among Albanians. Tired of Montenegrin and Serbian

attacks, Albanians are goaded into action with Kuka leading the fray. When things look desperate, Kuka makes the ultimate sacrifice, killing himself in a manner strategized to reduce military gain for the enemy, by destroying enemy soldiers along with himself:

Roared out Oso like a lion,
To Cetinje his voice echoed:
“Careful now, you damned Nikolla,
Here they call me Powder Oso,
Never you’ve seen an Albanian
Blow himself up and you with him.”
Then he set fire to the powder. (*Lute* 45)

The name “Oso” does not literally mean “powder.” Fishta uses a colloquial Albanian mode of speaking in which one declares the meaning of one’s name to be a quality relevant to the situation at hand. “Never you’ve seen an Albanian” is also an Albanian expression used in the context of proving oneself. Thereupon, Fishta writes idiomatic Albanian expressions into a national narrative in poetic form.

Another Albanian hero of the era, Marash Uci enters as a character in Canto 12. A northern Albanian highlander of the Hoti tribe, whom Fishta actually met in person, Uci told Fishta stories of Highlanders defending Albanian borders against invading Montenegrins. *The Highland Lute* frames “Marash Uci, son of Uc Mehmeti” as a fierce old warrior who “far and wide had crossed the oceans” (*Lute* 105), evoking Homer’s *Odysseus*. Like Odysseus to Telemachus, Fishta’s Uci is a father figure to two young shepherds, the “Sons of Cali,” to whom Uci narrates his battle experiences. Uci emerges in *The Highland Lute* as the essence of Albanian cultural values. “One request I have to ask you!,” he says, using a word significant in both Muslim and Christian discourse, but invoked for secular values: “Keep an eye upon your sheep and flocks. / Never loaded arms surrender, / Never quarrel with your comrades, / Do not fight or fidget with them, / When in need, they are your brothers, / Both with weapons and with money” (*Lute* 107). Uci explains to the Sons of Cali the Highland law, or *Kanun* – the Canon of Lekë Dukagjini. Dukagjini (1410–81) was a northern Albanian

nobleman who instituted a code of honor that became a core feature of Albanian culture for centuries, even after its hold as law faded in modern times. In its early tenure, the *Kanun* was, indeed, the only law in the highlands.¹ One feature of the *Kanun* is hospitality to the stranger and the guest. Uci says to the young shepherds, “Do not insult the stranger with words; / Offer to him bread and wine / As in Albania has been the custom,” adding the canny advice, “But do not trust or believe him” (*Lahuta* 108).

British anthropologist and traveler, Mary Edith Durham met the aging and sick Uci in person and befriended him. While quoting Durham's recollections about Uci and the decisions that were made at the Conference of London in 1913 in relation to the fate of the Albanian Highlands, Robert Elsie states:

Poor Marash, who was one of the best, died of pneumonia during the revolt of the tribes against Turkish rule. His house and all he owned was burnt. I met him in an exhausted state among the refugees. He smiled and pulled from his breast the two picture postcards I had sent him from London, the only things he had saved from the wreck. I helped him, and he begged me not to give him more than his share. One of the Franciscans gave him shelter, for he was generally beloved, but he did not survive the winter. I mourned him at the time, but was later glad that he had died before his beloved tribe was handed to the enemy. (58)

3. Oras, Zanas, and Witches with Whips

Kuka is Muslim; Marash Uci is Crypto-Catholic from the Hoti tribe. Marash is a Catholic name, and he is the son of Uc Mehmeti, whose name means converting to Islam and at the same time practicing Christianity in secret. In relation to conversion of some Hoti houses to Islam, Edith Durham explains: “[Hoti] consists of one *bariak* [banner] of about 500 houses. All are Catholic but three, those of Bariaktar's family” (466). Fishta weaves their stories together as parts of one larger story in *The Highland*

¹ Interestingly, a code formulated by a Christian Albanian bears a name that comes from the Arabic word for law, *qanun*.

Lute, valorizing each as a heroic contribution to the Albanian struggle for freedom from foreign domination. As a seminal biography, as Fishta puts it,

The Lute clearly witnessed and preached with its own voice throughout Albania that Marash Uci and Oso Kuka, Abdyl Frashëri and Ali Pasha, Dedë Gjo Luli and Vrioni, Father Gjoni and Hafiz Myslimi . . . held common ideals and were brothers . . . of the same consciousness and morals, sons of the same land and the same language. (qtd. in Gjeçaj and Gjini 54)

Moreover, Fishta's story unites Muslim and Christian Albanians while interweaving into the text indigenous Albanian folk mythology that lies outside both religions:

Muses are more than poetic inspiration; they are lively participants in the stories. They are among the cast of mythological figures who interfere in, comment on, and weep over the heroes and the nation. These, however, come from Albanian, not Greek, mythology. (Curtis 22)

This is most evident in his use of *oras* and *zanas*. An *ora* is a female spirit-being who can bestride a mountain watching for dangers that may threaten her people; she can take human or animal form, and is so awe-inspiring that even to mention her “name is often taboo” (Elsie and Mathie-Heck viii). In Albanian folklore, an *ora* is devoted to protecting a given entity, but there is only one *ora* per entity – which might be a people, a region, a nation, or even a house. Unlike benevolent *oras*, *zanas* may be benevolent or malevolent, and occur in plural numbers; *zanas* are female “mountain spirits who dwell near springs and torrents and who bestow their protection on Albanian warriors” (Elsie and Mathie-Heck viii). *Oras* and *zanas* have counterparts in Serbian and Montenegrin folklore, being part of regional Balkan folklore, but Fishta draws on a specifically Albanian understanding of them. Vampires, too, appear in *The Highland Lute*, and are not necessarily evil. A soldier killed in battle might get another shot at existing – as a vampire. On the Albanian side, Fishta also includes witches – who are good.

Canto 25, titled *Gjaku i marrun* (*Blood Vengeance Exacted*), brings to a head Fishta's seamless merging of history with folklore. In describing a historical clash between Albanians and Montenegrins, the poet gives center stage to *oras*, *zanas*, and witches. In the Battle of Nokshiq in 1879, Albanians of all regions and all religious backgrounds united in defending Plavë and Guci. *The Highland Lute* constructs this battle as avenging the death of a young Albanian woman, Tringa, killed by soldiers of the Montenegrin commander, Mark Milani. Tringa had been the personal friend of an Albanian *zana* named "Vizitor." This friendship makes the conflict personal for *Zana Vizitor*, who alone among the *zanas* is described by Fishta as "the Great *Zana*."

When the Montenegrins withdraw due to stormy weather, their *ora* and *zana* try to help them to escape, upon which the Albanian *Zana Vizitor* attacks the Montenegrin *zana*. The Great *Zana* then entreats two witches to help the Albanian army. The witches, Suta and Pasuta scourge the Montenegrin *zana* with whips made of snakes. Witch Pasuta shouts at the *Zana* of Montenegro, calling "Hydra" to rescue her in a reference to Greek mythology:

Think I'm going to liberate you?
Not before I've bathed your body
All in blood, your horrid Hydra!
You supported and assisted
Mark Milani, Slavic scion,
As he strove to crash Albania
To Cetinje's prince submit it.
Did you think the foes would vanish,
That the prince could come a-riding
Snatch Albanian land and rule it? (*Lute* 341)

These supernatural beings are quite involved in the political struggles of the humans and know all the details, names, and places of the struggle. They form a cultural basis for a shared Albanian identity in Fishta's epic, an identity grounded in Albanian lore and accommodating equally people of Islam and Christianity.

4. Always Bayram, Always Easter

“Always Easter, always Bayram” (*Lute* 322), says a Christian Albanian warrior in the thick of battle to his Muslim Albanian compatriot fighting beside him, referring to the Muslim and Christian holy days. This phrase of Fishta’s echoes throughout *The Highland Lute*. In Canto 8, a mysterious spirit takes the form of a beautiful woman and approaches the Albanian governor of Peja, Ali Pasha. Astonished, Ali asks her, “By the one, the God that made you / Are you human or a *zana*? / Do you hold Bayram or Easter?” (*Lute* 68). The spirit-woman rebukes him, “What I am and what I’m not, sir / If I hold Bayram or Easter / If in life I cast a shadow / There’s no time to ask such questions. . . . / For Albania is in peril” (*Lute* 68). She would know because finally the spirit-being identifies herself: “I’m the *ora* of Albania” (*Lute* 69). In effect, she scraps not only Muslim-Christian divisions among Albanians but also, perhaps even more importantly, divisions between Tosk and Gheg, the two regions of the traditional Albanian territories which correspond to two dialects of the Albanian language. Often Gheg folk identify more easily with Ghegs, who do not share their religion, than with a co-religionist who is a Tosk; the same holds for Tosks. “Rise, oh Ali, if you’re living,” she commands, “We’ve no time today for talking, / For the prince has readied canons, / Go and meet with Haxhi Zeka / Rouse Kosova, gather Reka, / Call the Tosks and Ghegs to battle / Gather them together just like / Pomegranate seeds united” (*Lute* 70).

Conclusion

Numerous artists worldwide were not celebrated while they lived. In like manner, the works of “the Albanian Homer,” Gjergj Fishta were buried together with him for forty-six years due to the rigid and cruel communist regime which devaluated art and repressed Albanian cultural production for almost five decades. Comparing Fishta to Homer, Adam J. Goldwyn states:

Like Homer, Fishta tells the story of an often squabbling but always brave and patriotic alliance of aristocratic heroes in a long war against the Ottoman Turks and their allies. Unlike the *Iliad*, however, *The Highland Lute* tells a story still alive in the memories

of Fishta's contemporaries. . . . Though Homeric elements abound throughout the poem, this canto exemplifies the ways Fishta grafts the Homeric epic and Albanian history, thus elevating the Albanian independence struggle to Homeric proportions and creating a new set of western-oriented heroes for the national epic. (509)

It was Fishta who immortalized the sublime of the northern Albanian mountains inhabited by brave, honorable, modest *Malësorë* (Highlanders), and at the same time satirized sarcastically the profiteers, the corrupted, and all others who would use their undeserved governmental position for their own benefits. Although he left behind a wide range of literary works, whether lyric or satiric verse, none of Fishta's other literary works have had such a significant impact as *The Highland Lute*. It is his heroic verse, which he employs in *The Lute*, which earned the poet candidacy for the Nobel Prize in 1940. At the same time, it is the *The Lute* which caused Fishta to be banned after 1944 in both communist Albania and socialist Yugoslavia:

During the period 1944 – 1990, Fishta and his work were violently attacked, consequently the receptor totally detached the relation with the works of this author, while his critical receptor was being abandoned/extra-letrarized [sic] under “the auspice” of the head of the future state himself. That marked the creation of the ideological reception model, which would soon be used as a reference for many other authors of [Albanian] literature. (Sula 99)

The epic was considered by officials in those countries to have anti-Serb/Montenegrin content damaging to the values of those two countries, which stood under the shade of “The Big Sister” – the Soviet Union. Although *The Highland Lute* was banned for decades, Albanian students, political prisoners, and intellectuals continued to be deeply invested in it. Finally, “after almost half a century of silence, Gjergj Fishta was commemorated openly on 5 January 1991 in Shkodra. During this first public recital of Fishta's works in Albania in forty-five years, the actor at one point hesitated in his lines, and was immediately and spontaneously assisted by members of the audience – who still knew many parts of *The Highland Lute* by heart” (Elsie and Mathie-Heck xvi). In this era of emerging

extremism in Albania and Kosovo, a continued analysis of Fishta's work is much needed to increase Albanian understanding of their shared history and culture. It would be good if Albanians continued to take to heart Fishta's call for civic unity across religious lines. The help of an *ora* would not hurt either.

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„UVIJEK BAJRAM, UVIJEK USKRS“: POZIV NA ALBANSKO GRAĐANSKO JEDINSTVO U *GORSKIM GUSLAMA* GJERGJA FISHTE

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Pripovijest u stihu *Gorske gusle* (*Lahuta e Malcis*, oko 1907.) Gjergja Fishta često se smatra albanskim nacionalnim epom. Ep donosi novu viziju zajedničkoga kulturnog identiteta Albanaca pripovijedajući priču o njihovoj borbi za neovisnost isprepletenu elementima regionalne i lokalne kulture koji dotad nisu pripadali uzvišenome književnom izričaju. Rad zastupa tezu da Fishta stvara nacionalni ep ne samo na temelju događaja o kojima pripovijeda, već i jezikom te opisima kojima se služi. Jezik epa uvodi albanske načine izražavanja u visoku književnost, prikazuje muslimanske i kršćanske albanske običaje na način koji naglašava njihovo zajedništvo i poseže za uporabom elemenata albanskoga folklora kao što su mitološka bića zana i ora, odsutnih u kršćanstvu i islamu, ali usko povezanih s mjestom iz kojeg su ponikli. U naglašavanju albanske zemlje, jezika i kulture, Fishtin ep oblikuje albanski građanski identitet koji prihvaća albansku vjersku raznolikost i nadilazi unutarnje podjele i uskogrudne identifikacije. U svjetlu nastanka ekstremističkih pokreta na Kosovu i u Albaniji, važno je ustrajati u relevantnoj analizi Fishtine vizije o albanskom građanskom jedinstvu i nadilaženju vjerskog razdora.

Ključne riječi: Gjergj Fishta, *Gorske gusle*, Marash Uci, Bajram, Uskrs, ora, zana